

Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?

Leo Strauss

This was presented as a lecture to a small audience at the Hillel Foundation of the University of Chicago on 4 February 1962. The text that follows was not prepared for publication, or reviewed, by Leo Strauss. It was prepared by the editors from a transcription of a tape recording. The spontaneous and informal aspects of the statement by Strauss and especially of the question period should be duly noted. One of the editors, Walter Nicgorski, was present at the lecture and the discussion that followed. All notes are those of the editors. Material in brackets [] has been supplied or moved to such places by the editors in an effort to clarify the prose of the text at points where that seemed necessary. Ellipsis points in brackets [. . .] indicate material lost or seriously garbled in transcription. The lecture as presented below begins after omitting only Strauss's formal greeting to the audience and an acknowledgment of his introduction, which was given on this occasion by Joseph Cropsey.

. . . I have to make two prefatory remarks. . . . When Rabbi Pekarsky first approached me and suggested this title I was repelled by it, not to say shocked by it. But then on reflection I found one could say something about it. At any rate I must say that to the extent to which I prepared this paper, I prepared it on the assumption that I was going to speak on the subject "Why Do We Remain Jews?" I learned of the subtitle only a few days ago, when thanks to some mishap in the printing division of the Hillel Foundation I saw for the first time the subtitle, on which I could not with propriety speak because, after all, everyone is a specialist and my specialty is (to use a very broad and nonspecialist name) social science rather than divinity. Now, social science demands from us, as we all know—and the gentlemen from the social science division I see here, some of whom take a very different view than I, would agree with me—[that we] start from solid if low facts and remain as much as possible on that ground. No flights of fancy, no science fiction, no metaphysics will enter. That is clear.

The second point which I have to make in my introduction is of a more private nature, which I am sad to have to make: I could not prepare this lecture, for entirely private reasons, as I would have wished to prepare it. But nevertheless I did not cancel the lecture

because I thought I am prepared, if not indeed for this lecture, for this subject. I believe I can say, without any exaggeration, that since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the "Jewish Question." May I only mention this single fact, perhaps, going very far back in my childhood. I believe [that when] I was about five or six years old in some very small German town, in a village, I saw in my father's house refugees from Russia, after some pogroms which had happened there, women, children, old men, on their way to Australia. At that time it could not happen in Germany. We Jews there lived in profound peace with our non-Jewish neighbors. There was a government, [perhaps] not in every respect admirable, but keeping an admirable order everywhere; and such things as pogroms would have been absolutely impossible. Nevertheless the story which I heard [on this occasion] made a very deep impression on me, which I have not forgotten until the present day. It was an unforgettable moment. I sensed for a moment that it could happen here. That was overlaid soon by other pleasing experiences, but still it went to my bones, if I may say so. Now this and many other experiences which would be absolutely boring and improper to rehearse are the bases of my lecture. You will not expect, then, a lucid presentation. On the other hand I will promise to give, as I indicated by the reference to the fact that I am a social scientist, what one would call a "hard-boiled" one. I prefer to call it a "frank" one. I will not beat around the bush in any respect. At the same time I hope that I can reconcile what not necessarily all social scientists do: the avoiding of beating around the bush with a treatment which we would call *behavod* or, to translate it, "honorable." I think such would be possible. Now I turn to my subject.

The main title taken by itself implies that we could cease to be Jews [and] that there might be very good reasons for not remaining Jews. It even suggests this possibility. The clearest expression of this view, of this premise, was given by Heinrich Heine, the well-known poet: "Judaism is not a religion but a misfortune." The conclusions from this premise are obvious. Let us get rid of Judaism as fast as we can and as painlessly as we can. If I may now use an almost technical word, complete "assimilation" is the only help. Now this solution to the problem was always possible, and it was always somehow suggested because at all times it was very difficult to be a Jew. Think of the Middle Ages. Think of the Reformation—to say nothing of other times. In a way, that solution

was even easier in the past than it is now. It was sufficient in the Christian countries for a Jew to convert to Christianity and then he would cease to be a Jew, and no statistician will ever be able to find out how many Jews took this easy way out of what Heine calls "misfortune." Yet it was not quite easy even then. I will not speak of the obvious things like the separation from one's relatives and friends. There was a big experiment made with this solution in Spain, after 1492, when the Jews were expelled from Spain. What I say about these things, of course, is entirely [based on] authorities I have read.

Spain was the first country in which Jews felt at home, although they knew they were in exile. Therefore the expulsion from Spain was an infinitely greater misfortune for the Spanish Jews than the expulsion from France in 1340 (if I remember well) or the expulsion from England in 1290 or so. Quite a few Jews simply could not tear themselves away from Spain. This difficulty was enhanced if the individuals in question were wealthy, had large possessions, especially landed possessions; some of them, some leaders of Jewish communities converted to Christianity. And they stayed in Spain. But [here at] this time it was different because there were so many converts at the same time, not one here and another there. As a consequence there was a reaction to these many new Christians. And the reaction showed itself in distrust of them. Many Christians thought that these converts were not sincere believers in Christianity but simply had preferred their earthly fortunes to their faith. So the Inquisition entered, and all kinds of things which are most horrible to read; and of course, in some cases, even if the Inquisition did its worst, it could not give a legal proof of the fact that some former Jew had engaged in Jewish practices or whatever it may be, and so quite a few survived. But one thing was done which was extralegal but not illegal: the Spaniards made a distinction between the old Christians and the new Christians, and they began to speak of Spaniards of pure blood—the old Spaniards—and, by implication, of Spaniards of impure blood, meaning the *conversos*. The Jews who had converted to Christianity were forced to remain Jews, in a manner.

This is ancient history. Assimilation now does not mean conversion to Christianity, as we know, because assimilation now is assimilation to a secular society, a society which is not legally a Christian society, a society beyond the difference between Judaism and Christianity, and—if every religion is always a particular religion

(Judaism, Christianity)—an areligious society, a liberal society. In such a society there are no longer any legal disabilities of Jews as Jews. But a liberal society stands or falls by the distinction between the political, or the state, and society, or by the distinction between the public and the private. In the liberal society there is necessarily a private sphere with which the state's legislation must not interfere. It is an essential element of this liberal society, with its essential distinction between the public and private, that religion as a particular religion, not as a general religion, is private. Every citizen is free to adhere to any religion he sees fit. Now, given this—the necessary existence of such a private sphere—the liberal society necessarily makes possible, permits, and even fosters what is called by many people “discrimination.” And here in this well-known fact the “Jewish problem” (if I may call it that) reappears. There are restricted areas and in various ways, [. . .] I do not have to belabor this point, any glance at [a] journal of sociology or at Jewish journals would convince you of the fact if you have any doubt about its existence. Therefore the practical problem for the individual Jew on the low and solid ground is this: how can I escape “discrimination”? (A term which I beg you to understand as used always with quotation marks. I would not use it of my own free will.) The answer is simple: by ceasing to be recognizable as a Jew. There are certain rules of that which everyone can guess, I would say, *a priori*; and I would not be surprised if there were an Ann Landers, and other writers of this type, who had written perhaps a long list of these techniques. The most well known are mixed marriages, changes of name, and childless marriages. It would be a worthy subject for a sociological study to enlarge on this theme and to exhaust it if possible. I do not have to go into it because it is not truly important, for this solution is possible at most only for individuals here or there, not for large groups. I once heard the story of some Jews in Los Angeles who tried to solve the “discrimination” problem by becoming Christian Scientists; there were first four and then ten and then more. Then at a certain moment the chairman (I don't know whether they call him “chairman”) said, well, that is really nice, but why don't you make another group—a group of your own—of Christian Scientists, meaning former Jews. I would say that this possibility [assimilation by ceasing to be recognizable] is refuted by a very simple statistical phenomenon not known to me statistically but only by observation: the Jewish birthrate.

A broad solution would require the legal prohibition against "discrimination" in every manner, shape, or form. And I have seen people—Jews—who just wanted that. Fraternities must not be permitted to pick their own people; and strictly speaking, no man can pick his own company. The prohibition against every "discrimination" would mean the abolition of the private sphere, the denial of the difference between the state and society—in a word, the destruction of liberal society—and therefore it is not a sensible objective or policy. But some people would say, "Why not the destruction of liberal society if this is the only way in which we can get the abolition of discrimination (or what they call the 'abolition of injustice')?" Now, we have empirical data about this fact—the abolition of a liberal society and how it effects the fate of Jews. [An] experiment [was] made on a large scale in a famous country, a very large country, unfortunately a very powerful country, called Russia. We all are familiar with the fact that the policy of communism is the policy of the communist government, and not of a private fraternity like other organizations, and this policy is anti-Jewish. That is undoubtedly the fact. I have checked it by some information I receive from certain quarters. I asked a gentleman whom I know very well, a friend of mine, who is very much in favor of a deal with Russia. He is a Jew. I asked him, "What did you observe about Jews in Soviet Russia?" And he said, "Of course, it is true: Jews are discriminated against, as a matter of principle, by the government." And he gave me a striking example. Some of you will say, all right, that is the policy of the present Russian government; it is not essential to communism. In other words, it is possible to abolish liberal society, to abolish the difference between state and society, without having to become anti-Jewish. I would like to discuss this objection—that it is not essential to communism to be anti-Jewish. I would say it is very uncommunistic to seek for the essence of communism outside of what they call the "historic reality of communism," in a mere ideal or aspiration. Trotsky's communism, which was different and which was surely not anti-Jewish in this sense, has been refuted by his highest authority: history. A Trotskyite is a living, a manifest, contradiction. There is no longer a Western revolutionary proletariat, to put it on a somewhat broader basis, and that settles this issue perfectly. Only thanks to Stalin could the communist revolution survive. Stalin was a wiser statesman from this point of view than Trotsky—and to some extent, than Lenin—by demanding socialism within a single coun-

try. Only thanks to Stalin could the communist revolution survive Hitler.

But in order to survive Hitler, Stalin had to learn from Hitler. That is always so: in order to defeat an enemy you have to take a leaf from his book. Stalin learned two grave lessons from Hitler. The first, which has nothing to do directly with our issue but should be mentioned, is that bloody purges of fellow revolutionaries are not only possible, but eminently helpful. The old communist theory (as you surely know) was: no repetition of the bad experiences of the French Revolution, where the revolution ate its own children. And then Hitler showed by [his] classic act against Roehm that this can be done; it makes governing much easier.¹ Hence, the big Stalin purges.

Second (and here I come back to our immediate subject), in pre-First World War socialism where the distinction between Bolshevism and Menshevism was not so visible—at least not in the Western countries—it was an axiom, “Anti-Semitism is the socialism of the fools,” and therefore incompatible with intelligent socialism. But again, one can state the lesson which Hitler gave Stalin in very simple words, as follows. The fact that anti-Semitism is the socialism of the fools is an argument not against, but for, anti-Semitism; given the fact that there is such an abundance of fools, why should one not steal that very profitable thunder. Of course, one must not become a prisoner of this like that great fool Hitler who believed in his racial theories; that is absurd. But judiciously used, politically used, anti-Jewish policies make governing Russians and Ukrainians, and so on, much easier than if one would be strictly fair to Jews. I do not have to point out the obvious fact that we must think not only of the Russians, the Ukrainians, but also of the Arabs; and everyone can easily see that there are many more Arabs in the world than there are Jews. I mean, a sober statesman for whom the end sanctifies every means has no choice. Khrushchev (I think one can say) abandoned lesson number one regarding the desirability and usefulness of bloody purges of party members—let me add, for the time being—but he surely kept lesson number two, and it has come to stay.

1. Ernst Roehm, longtime associate and supporter of Hitler and the key leader of the paramilitary brownshirts, was killed in an extremely vicious general purge of the Nazi movement in late June 1934; the purge appeared to Hitler politically necessary to secure his rise to full political control in Germany.

I draw a conclusion. It is impossible not to remain a Jew. It is impossible to run away from one's origins. It is impossible to get rid of one's past by wishing it away. There is nothing better than the uneasy solution offered by liberal society, which means legal equality plus private "discrimination." We must simply recognize the fact, which we all know, that the Jewish minority is not universally popular, and the consequences which follow from that. We all know that there is in this country an entirely extralegal, but not illegal, what we can call "racial hierarchy" coming down from the Anglo-Saxons, down to the Negroes; and we are just above the Negroes. We must face that. And we must see that there is a similarity between the Jewish and the Negro question. There are quite a few Jewish organizations which are very well aware of this; but also, in order to keep the record straight, we must not forget the difference. When we Jews fight for something which we may fairly call "justice," we appeal to principles ultimately which (if I may say so) were originally our own. When the Negroes fight for justice, they have to appeal to principles which were not their own, their ancestors' in Africa, but which they learned from their oppressors. This is not an altogether negligible difference, which should be stated by someone who does not want to beat around the bush.

I begin again. There is no solution to the Jewish problem. The expectation of such a solution is due to the premise that every problem can be solved. There was a famous writer, a great mathematician in the sixteenth century, as I read somewhere—Vieta—who literally said that there is no problem which cannot be solved. This is, in application to social matters, a premise of many well-meaning men in the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I disagree with them entirely. It is not self-evident that every problem can be solved, and therefore we should not be altogether surprised if the Jewish problem cannot be solved.

Let us briefly survey the solutions which have been suggested. The first is the assimilation of individuals, which I disposed of before. The second would be assimilation in a different form: Judaism would be understood as a sect like any other sect; I say advisedly a "sect," and not as a "religion." A sect is a society that is based on an entirely voluntary membership—so that today you belong to sect A, and if you change your mind you leave sect A and enter sect B; and the same applies, of course, to all members of your family. The fact that the man stems from Jewish parents

would be entirely irrelevant from this point of view. I do not believe that this opinion can be reconciled with anything ever understood as Jewish, regardless of whether it is orthodox, conservative, or reform.

There is a third solution—the only one [of those] mentioned which deserves our serious attention—and that is assimilation as a nation. Here the fact that the Jews are an ethnic group is honestly faced. But it is also implied that Judaism is a misfortune, and hence that we must do something about the problem. But the problem cannot be solved except on a national scale. We Jews are a nation like any other nation; and just as any other nation, we have the right to demand self-determination. It leads necessarily to the demand for a Jewish state. This was the view taken by the strictly political Zionists. I emphasize the word *strictly* because in fact there are all kinds of combinations which are by no means due to accident but to one of the deepest principles of human nature—which is that man is the animal who wishes to have the cake and to eat it. To make clear what I mean, I remind you of the motto of the most impressive statement of political Zionism: Pinsker's *Autoemancipation*, written in the eighties of the last century.² Pinsker's motto is this: if I am not for myself, who will I be for? and if not now, when? That is, don't expect help from others, and don't postpone your decision. This is a quotation from a well-known Jewish book, *The Sayings of the Fathers*; but in the original, something else is said which Pinsker omitted: "But if I am only for myself, what am I?"³ The omission of these words constitutes the definition of pureblooded political Zionism. There was, long before Pinsker, a man who sketched the principles of political Zionism—a great man, but not a good Jew—and that was Spinoza. Towards the end of the third chapter of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, he said (I am speaking from memory), "If the principles of their religion did not effeminate the Jews, I would regard it as perfectly possible that one day, if the political constellation is favorable, they might succeed in restoring their state."⁴ I don't believe he said "in Palestine" because,

2. Leon Pinsker (1821–91) was a Polish-born Russian Jew whose influential Zionist tract *Autoemancipation* appeared in 1882.

3. This "saying" as presented in a widely used translation by R. Travers Herford reads, "If I am not for myself who is for me? and when I am for myself what am I? and if not now, when?" *The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 34.

4. The relevant sentence in the commonly used R. H. M. Elwes translation reads, "Nay, I would go so far as to believe that if the foundations of their

from his point of view, Uganda would have been as good as Palestine. I did not explain what he meant by the effeminating character of the Jewish religion. He meant by that trust in God instead of trust in one's own power and "hardware." But in spite of the undeniable fact that political Zionism, pure and simple, is based on a radical break with the principles of the Jewish tradition, I cannot leave the subject without paying homage to it. Political Zionism was more passionately and more soberly concerned with the human dignity of the Jews than any other movement. What it had in mind ultimately was that the Jews should return to their land with their heads up, but not by virtue of a divine act but rather of political and military action—fighting.

Yet it is impossible to settle all Jews in that very small land. Political Zionism was a very honorable suggestion, but one must add that it was also merely formal or poor. I would like to illustrate this. I was myself (as you might have guessed) a political Zionist in my youth, and was a member of a Zionist student organization. In this capacity I occasionally met Jabotinsky, the leader of the revisionists.⁵ He asked me, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, we read the Bible, we study Jewish history, Zionist theory, and, of course, we keep abreast of developments, and so on." He replied, "And rifle practice?" And I had to say, "No."

In this [student] group, when I talked to my friends—some [of whom] are now very high officials in Israel—I made this observation. They were truly passionate Zionists and worked very much and were filled with enthusiasm. But, after all, you cannot always make speeches and have political discussions, or do other administrative work: you also have to have, so to say, a life of your own. I was struck by the fact that the substance of the intellectual life of some of these estimable young men—to the extent that it was not merely academic and therefore of no particular interest outside of academic halls—consisted of their concern with people like Balzac. The main point is that this Zionism was strictly limited to political action. The mind [—or even the heart—] was in no way employed in matters Jewish.

Now this led very early to a reaction and opposition to political

religion have not emasculated their minds they may even, if occasion offers, so changeable are human affairs, raise up their empire afresh, and that God may a second time elect them." *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 56.

5. Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940) was a Russian Jew who founded and led the Revisionist movement in Zionism.

Zionism by cultural Zionism. Cultural Zionism means simply that it is not enough to have a Jewish state; the state must also have a Jewish culture. In other words, it must have a life of its own. Jewish culture means the product of the Jewish mind, in counterdistinction to other national minds. If we look, however, at what this means in specific terms, we see that the rock bottom of any Jewish culture are the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash. And if you take these things with a minimum of respect or seriousness, you must say they were not meant to be products of the Jewish mind. They were meant to be ultimately "from Heaven," and this is the crux of the matter: Judaism cannot be understood as a culture. There are folk dances and pottery and all that. But you can't live on that. The substance is not culture, but divine revelation. Therefore the only consistent solution, clear solution, is that which abandons, which goes beyond, cultural Zionism and becomes clearly religious Zionism. Return to the Jewish faith, to the faith of our ancestors.

But here we are up against a difficulty which underlies the very title of the lecture and everything I said before. What shall those Jews do who cannot believe as our ancestors believed? So while religious Zionism is the only clear solution, it is not feasible, humanly speaking, for all Jews. I repeat: it is impossible to get rid of one's past. It is necessary to accept one's past. That means that out of this undeniable necessity one must make a virtue. The virtue in question is fidelity, loyalty, piety in the old Latin sense of the word *pietas*. The necessity of taking this step appears from the disgraceful character of the only alternative, of denying one's origin, past, or heritage. A solution of a man's problem which can be achieved only through a disgraceful act is a disgraceful solution. But let us be detached; let us be objective, scientific. Is this universally true? We must bust the case wide open in order to understand the difficulty; I am not interested in preaching up any solution. I try to help myself and (if I can) some of you in understanding our difficulty. Let us take a man by nature very gifted for all excellences of man—of the mind and of the soul—who stems from the gutter. Is he not entitled to run away from the gutter? Surely, one could even say that by being silent about his gutter origins he acts more decently than by displaying them, and thus annoying others with a bad smell. Yet, however this may be, this interesting case (which deserves all our compassion, I think) is surely not our case. Our worst enemies admit this in one way or another. Our worst enemies are not called—since I don't know how many years—"anti-Sem-

ites," a word which I shall never use, which I regard as almost obscene. I think that if we are sensible we abolish it from our usage. I said in a former speech here that it was coined by some German or French pedant: I smelled them. But then I learned, a few weeks ago, it was coined by a German pedant, a fellow called Marr. The reason was very simple: "anti-Semitism" means hatred of Jews. Why not call it as we Jews call it? *Rismus*, "viciousness"? "Hatred of Jews" is perfectly intelligible; "anti-Semitism" was coined in a situation in which people could no longer justify their hatred of Jews by the fact that Jews are not Christians. They had to find another reason; and since the thirteenth century was almost as proud of science as the twentieth century, the reason had to be scientific. Science proves that the Western World consists of two races—the Aryan and the Semitic race—and therefore, by speaking of anti-Semitism, our enemies could claim that they acted on a spiritual principle, not mere hatred. The difficulty is that the Arabs are also Semites. One of my Arab friends was occasionally asked in the Chicago suburbs, "You are, of course, an anti-Semite." And he would say, "I can't be that."

So I speak of our enemies, and I want to show that they recognize that we are not from the gutter. Let us take the latest and crudest and simplest example: the Nazis. The Nazis' system was based on the notion of the Aryan. I mean, it was no longer a Christian Germany; it was to be an Aryan Germany. But what does "Aryan" mean? The Nazis were compelled, for example, to give the Japanese the status of Aryans, and quite a few others. In a word, "Aryan" had no meaning but "non-Jewish." The Nazi regime was the only regime of which I know which was based on no principle other than the negation of Jews. It could not define its highest objective except by putting the Jews into the center; that is a great compliment to us, if not intended as such. I take more serious cases: the anti-Judaism of late classical antiquity, when we (and incidentally also the Christians) were accused by the pagan Romans of standing convicted of hatred of the human race. I contend that it was a very high compliment. And I will try to prove it.

This accusation reflects an undeniable fact. For the human race consists of many nations or tribes or, in Hebrew, *goyim*. A nation is a nation by virtue of what it looks up to. In antiquity a nation was a nation by virtue of its looking up to its gods. They did not have ideologies at that time; they did not have even ideas at that time.

At the top there were the gods. And, now, our ancestors asserted *a priori*—that is to say, without looking at any of these gods—that these gods were nothings and abominations. That the highest of any nation was nothing and an abomination. (I cannot develop [the basis for this] now. [For that] we would have to go into broader [considerations]—into that metaphysical, science-fiction thing which I have tried to avoid—but I must make one remark.) In the light of the purity which Isaiah understood when he said, of himself, “a man of unclean lips in the midst of a nation of unclean lips,” the very parthenon is impure.⁶ This is still alive in Judaism today—not among all Jews, but among some. I heard the story that, when Ben-Gurion⁷ went to Thailand for negotiations or something, he went to a Buddhist temple and there was quite an uproar in Israel about that on the old, old grounds. And I suggested to the man who told me that he should wire to Ben-Gurion that he should say that what he was meditating upon in that Buddhist temple was the foreign policy of Israel, which might be pleaded as an attenuating circumstance.

Now, the fight of our ancestors against Rome was unique. We have the two greatest cases: the Jewish fight against Rome and the German fight against Rome. The Germans were more successful from the military point of view: they defeated the Romans; we were defeated. Yet, victory or defeat are not the highest criteria. And if we compare these two actions, we see that the fight of our ancestors was not merely a fight against foreign oppression, but it was a fight in the name of what one should very provisionally call an “idea”—the only fight in the name of an idea made against the Roman Empire.

The next great anti-Jewish body was the Christian republic. The hatred of Jews persisted, but changed; in some respects it was [even] intensified. For the Jewish people’s posture toward the God-man was the same as that against the manlike god of the Greeks and Romans. And since there are many Christians today who are no longer Trinitarians, one difference surely remains between Judaism and Christianity which was never, never taken back. The Christian assertion that the redeemer has come was always counted by our ancestors with the assertion that the redeemer has not

6. Isaiah 6:5.

7. David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) was the first prime minister of the State of Israel; he retired from his leadership post in 1963.

come. One can perhaps say (and I say this without any animus) that *the* justification of Judaism in its fight with Christianity was supplied by the Crusades. One only has to read that history as a Jew to be satisfied with the fact that one is a Jew. The Crusades consisted partly of a simple orgy of murder of Jews. Wherever the Crusaders went—above all, in Jerusalem itself—how did our ancestors act? Permit me to read a few lines from the writings of the greatest living Jewish historian, Yitzhak F. Baer's *Galut*.

The best description left us of the persecutions that took place at the time of the First Crusade are to be found in Hebrew records. These were constructed from shorter reports describing the happenings in individual places and provinces, and encountered similar pamphlets with opposite tendencies that were circulated by the Christians. In this age religious-national martyrdom reaches its highest expression. These martyrs are no seekers after death like the early Christians, no heroes challenging destiny. Violence and death come unsought. And the whole community suffers—old and young, women and children, willing or not. At first they fight for the preservation of the community, and they hold off their enemies before the walls of the episcopal palace or the fortress just as long as defense is possible.⁸

One must add here the remark, which Baer of course does not deny, that the higher clergy behaved on the whole much better than the lower clergy. You know the peasants' sons who became priests were much more fanatical and savage than [. . .] the famous case of Bernard [de Clairvaux] who tried to prevent that. But they did not prevail.

[Strauss then continues reading from Baer's *Galut*.] But then, when all hope for safety is gone, they are ready for martyrdom. No scene is more stirring than the sabbath meal of the pious Jews in [Xanten] Rumania (1096): Hardly had the grace before the meal been recited when the news came of the enemy's approach; immediately they fulfilled the ceremony of the closing grace, recited the formula expressing faith in the oneness of God, and carried out the terrible act of sacrifice that was renewed again and again, generation after generation from the time of Macedon [Massada] in the Roman rule.

8. The reading by Strauss from Baer's *Galut* corresponds almost in its entirety to a translation of *Galut* by Robert Warshow that first appeared in 1947. The passage read has been checked against the current version of the Warshow translation (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), where it appears on pages 24–25. Punctuation was done in accord with this current edition.

The martyrologies here described in frightful clarity and ritual of voluntary mutual slaughter (not the sacrifice of enemies falsely ascribed to the Jews), and have glorified it in poetry modeled after the sacrifice of Isaac.

The Reformation abolished bloody persecution. But the unbloody persecution which remained was in some respects worse than the bloody persecution of the Middle Ages because it did not call forth the fighting qualities which were still so powerfully visible in that glorious time for us of the Crusades. I summarize. Our past, our heritage, our origin is then not misfortune as Heine said—still less, baseness. But suffering indeed; heroic suffering; suffering stemming from the heroic act of self-dedication of a whole nation to something which it regarded as infinitely higher than itself—in fact, as the infinitely highest. No Jew can do anything better for himself today than to live in remembering this past.

But someone might say, "Is this sufficient if the old faith has gone? Must the Jew who cannot believe what his ancestors believe not admit to himself that his ancestors dedicated themselves to a delusion—if to the noblest of all delusions? Must he not dedicate himself to a life in a world which is no longer Jewish, and by the same token no longer Christian, but, as one could say, post-Judeo-Christian? However repulsive the thought of assimilation must be to any proud man, must he not accept assimilation as a moral necessity and not as a convenience? Is not the noblest in man his capacity to assimilate himself to the truth?" Very well, let us then reconsider assimilation.

We will be helped in that reconsideration in this statement by a non-Jew, by a German. By a German, in addition, who has a very bad reputation in many quarters—and that is Friedrich Nietzsche. I would like to read to you an aphorism which will not please every one of you, from Nietzsche's *Dawn of Day*, aphorism 205.

Of the people of Israel. To the spectacles to which the next century invites us belongs the decision of the destiny of the European Jews. That they have cast their die, crossed their Rubicon, is now quite obvious: it only remains for them either to become the lords of Europe or to lose Europe, as once in olden times they lost Egypt, where they confronted a similar either-or. In Europe, however, they have gone through a schooling of eighteen centuries such as no other people here can show, and in such a way that the experiences of this terrible time of training have benefitted not merely the community but even more the individual. As a consequence of this the psychic and spiritual

resources of today's Jews are extraordinary; they, least of all those who inhabit Europe, reach, when in distress, for the cup or for suicide in order to escape a deep dilemma—as the less gifted are so prone to do.⁹

Every sociologist knows that, regarding suicide, the situation is terribly changeable. That was still the old sturdy Jews of Europe he means.

[Strauss continues reading from Nietzsche.] Every Jew has in the history of his fathers and ancestors a treasure of examples of coldest self-possession and steadfastness in dreadful situations, of bravery under the cloak of wretched submission, their heroism in *spernere se sperni* (despising that one is despised) surpasses the virtues of all the saints. One has wanted to make them contemplate by treating them contemptibly for two millennia, and by barring them access to all honors, to everything honorable, and by all the more deeply pushing them down into the more sordid trades—and indeed, under this procedure they have not become cleaner. But contemptible? They themselves chosen for the highest things, nor have the virtues of all sufferers ever ceased to adorn them. The way in which they honor their fathers and children, the reason in their marriages and marriage customs, distinguish them among all Europeans. In addition they have understood how to create a feeling of power and eternal vengeance out of the very trades that were left to them (or to which one left them); one must say in the excuse even of their usury that without this occasionally pleasant and useful torture of those who hold them in contempt, they could hardly have endured holding fast to their self-respect for so long. For our self-respect is tied to our ability to retaliate in good and evil. In all this their vengeance does not easily carry them too far, for they have all that liberality, also of the soul, to which frequent changes of place, climate, customs of neighbors and oppressors, educates man; they possess by far the greatest experience in all human intercourse, and [even in their passions they practice the caution taught by this experience. They are so sure in the] exercise of their spiritual versatility and shrewdness that they never, not even in the most bitter circumstances, find it necessary to earn their bread by physical force as manual laborers, porters, or farmhands. [Strauss remarks, "Well, we knew only Germany."] Their manners still show

9. If Strauss in this reading used a translation other than his own, the editors have not yet located it. The transcription of the reading from Nietzsche appears, at one point, to be missing a line, which is supplied in brackets from the recent translation by R. J. Hollingdale published under the title *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982), see pp. 205–6. The translation read by Strauss was found to correspond quite closely to that of Hollingdale, so that the two set side by side present no significant interpretative differences.

that one has never put noble chivalric feelings into their soul and beautiful weapons about their body: something obtrusive alternates with an often tender and almost always painful submissiveness. But now that they unavoidably intermarry more and more, from year to year, with the noblest blood of Europe, they will soon have a good heritage of the manners of soul and body so that in a hundred years already they will appear noble enough so that as lords they will not awaken the *shame* of those subdued by them. And that is what matters! Therefore a settlement of their case is still premature! They themselves best know that there can be no thought of a conquest of Europe or of any violence whatsoever; but also that at some time Europe may fall like a perfectly ripe fruit into their hand, which only casually reaches out. In the meantime it is necessary for them to distinguish themselves in all the areas of European distinction and to stand among the first, until they will be far enough along to determine themselves that which distinguishes. Then they will be called the inventors and guides of the Europeans and no longer offend their shame. And how shall it issue forth, this abundance of passions, virtues, resolutions, renunciations, struggles, victories of every kind how shall it issue forth if not at last in great spiritual men and works: Then, when the Jews will be able to exhibit as their work such precious stones and golden vessels as the European people of shorter and less profound experience neither can nor could bring forth, when Israel shall have changed its eternal vengeance into an eternal blessing of Europe, then that seventh day will once again be here when the old Jewish God will be able to *rejoice* in Himself, his creation, and his chosen people—and we all, all will rejoice with Him!

This is the most profound and most radical statement on assimilation which I have read. It does not lose any of its significance by the fact that Nietzsche has not written without irony. In other words, he had no hopes in this respect; he only thought something through. Assimilation cannot mean abandoning the inheritance, but only giving it another direction, transforming it. And assimilation cannot be an end; it could only be a way toward that. Assimilation is an intermediate stage in which it means distinguishing oneself in pursuits which are not as such Jewish but, as Nietzsche would say, European—as we would say, Western. After having received a notion of what assimilation in the highest could mean—and only in this way can we understand any assimilation—we must look at the actual assimilation. After one has heard such a passage, one trembles to look at the actual assimilation. There exists a kind of Jewish glorification of every clever or brilliant Jewish mediocrity—which is as pitiable as it is laughable. It reminds me of villagers who have produced their first physicist and hail him for

this reason as the greatest physicist that ever was. I refuse to quote chapter and verse, but when I read statements in Jewish periodicals about Jewish celebrities I am always reminded of that. I became so distrustful of it [at one time, that I did not] believe that Einstein was of any significance. I am not a theoretical physicist and, therefore, I was as entitled to my opinion as any other ignoramus. Then I asked a trustworthy friend of mine—a physicist, a Jew. I told him my opinion [about the matter, and] I had the feeling that this was really a propaganda machine organized by Einstein's wife. I believe that was, by the way, true; I had heard that [there was such an effort]. But then he told me,

You are mistaken. He [Einstein] was presently at a seminar in Berlin, and that was tops in physics: Planck and other such men were present. And it was simply so. Einstein had the defect that he didn't know elementary mathematics. I mean that was his genuine defect, but his conceits, his inventions, were surpassing that of all the others there. You must believe it. He is really a first-rate physicist, and surely the greatest physicist of this epoch. It is an empirical fact.

So I accepted that. But I must say I am still proud of my resistance, because this inclination to self-glorification in things in which there is no reason for self-glorification is a disgrace. That we have today so many outstanding Jews is due—let us not deceive ourselves about that—to the general decline, to a general victory of mediocrity. It is today very easy to be a great man. “Among the blind, the one-eyed is king” goes the proverb.

[Nietzsche's analysis has some defects though] his statement, which is almost dithyrambic, is based on a very deep analysis—perhaps on the deepest analysis ever made—of what assimilation could possibly mean. Now, the most patent defect of Nietzsche's analysis seems to be this: the regeneration or cleansing which he had in mind as part of the process proved to be insufficient as a work of individuals—however numerous, dedicated, or gifted. It required and requires an act of national cleansing or purification; and this, in my mind, was the establishment of the state of Israel. Everyone who has seen Israel—nay, everyone who has witnessed the response to that act in New York—will understand what I mean. But this fact refutes Nietzsche's dream. For the establishment of the state of Israel means, while it may be a progress in a way of Jewish assimilation—as it surely is—is also a reassertion of the difference between Jews and non-Jews. Since I said “an act” of

assimilation, may I tell another story from my youth? I had a friend who was not a Zionist, and his father was an old-fashioned liberal Jew. They called themselves in Germany "German citizens of Jewish faith." And what he said when he goes to fetch his father from the synagogue and sees him together with his other assimilationist friends, and then he sees these young generations of Zionist boys, then he must admit that this older generation which is so un-Jewish by refusing any national character of Judaism is much more Jewish than this young generation is which was [. . .] Jews. It's undeniable.

Judaism is not a misfortune (I am back to my beginning) but, let us say, a "heroic delusion." In what does this delusion consist? The one thing needful is righteousness or charity; in Judaism these are the same. This notion of the one thing needful is not defensible if the world is not the creation of the just and loving God, the holy God. The root of injustice and uncharitableness, which abounds, is not in God but in the free acts of his creatures—in sin. The Jewish people and their fate are the living witness for the absence of redemption. This, one could say, is the meaning of the chosen people: the Jews are chosen to prove the absence of redemption. The greatest expression surpassing everything that any present-day man could write is that great Jewish prayer which will be known to some of you and which is a stumbling block to many: *Oleynu leshabeach*. It would be absolutely improper for me to read it now.¹⁰

✧

10. The transcribers supplied the following version of the prayer that Strauss referred to but did not read. Unable to locate the source of this translation, the editors checked it against a recently published version and found no significant variations. The anglicized title of the prayer in this version is *Aleinu*.

It is our duty to praise the Lord of all things, to ascribe greatness to him who formed the world in the beginning, since he hath not made us like the nations of other lands, and hath not placed us like other families of the earth, since he hath not assigned unto us a portion as unto them, nor a lot as unto all their multitude. For we bend the knee and offer worship and thanks before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, who stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, the seat of whose glory is in the heavens above, and the abode of whose might is in the loftiest heights. He is our God; there is none else; in truth he is our King; there is none besides him; as it is written in this Law, And thou shalt know this day, and lay it to thine heart, that the Lord he is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath: there is none else.

We therefore hope in thee, O Lord our God, that we may speedily behold the glory of thy might, when thou wilt remove the abominations from the earth, and the idols will be utterly cut off, when the world will be perfected under the kingdom of the Almighty, and when thou wilt

Now let us reflect for a few moments more—be patient—about delusion. What is a delusion? We also say a “dream.” No nobler dream was ever dreamt. It is surely nobler to be victim of the most noble dream than to profit from a sordid reality and to wallow in it. Dream is akin to aspiration. And aspiration is a kind of divination of an enigmatic vision. And an enigmatic vision in the emphatic sense is the perception of the ultimate mystery, of the truth of the ultimate mystery. The truth of the ultimate mystery—the truth that there is an ultimate mystery, that being is radically mysterious—cannot be denied even by the unbelieving Jew of our age. That unbelieving Jew of our age, if he has any education, is ordinarily a positivist; [if he is without an education, he is, if not a positivist, a believer in science]. As scientist he must be concerned with the Jewish problem among innumerable other problems. He reduces the Jewish problem to something unrecognizable: religious minorities, ethnic minorities. In other words, you can put together the characteristics of the Jewish problem by finding one element of it there, another element of it here, and so on. I am speaking from experience. I had once a discussion with some social scientist in the presence of Rabbi Pekarsky where I saw how this was done. The unity, of course, was completely missed. The social scientist cannot see the phenomenon which he tries to diagnose, analyze, as it is. His notion, his analysis, is based on a superficial and thoughtless psychology or sociology. This sociology or psychology is superficial and thoughtless because it does not reflect on itself, on science itself. At the most it raises the question “What is science?” Nevertheless—whatever may follow from that—I must, by God, come to a conclusion.

Science, as the positivist understands it, is susceptible of infinite progress. That you learn in every elementary school today, I believe. Every result of science is provisional and subject to future

return unto thyself all the wicked of the earth. Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto thee every knee must bow, every tongue must swear. Before thee, O Lord our God, let them bow and fall; and unto thy glorious name let them give honor; let them all accept the yoke of thy kingdom, and do thou reign over them speedily, and for ever and ever. For the kingdom is thine, and to all eternity thou wilt reign in glory; as it is written in thy Law, The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. And it is said, And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall the Lord be One, and his name One.

See p. 197 of *A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals, and Weekdays*, ed. and trans. Rabbi Jules Harlow (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1985).

revision, and this will never change. In other words, fifty thousand years from now there will still be results entirely different from those now, but still subject to revision. Science is susceptible of infinite progress. But how can science be susceptible of infinite progress if its object does not have an inner infinity? In other words, the object of science is everything that is—being. The belief admitted by all believers in science today—that science is by its nature essentially progressive, and eternally progressive—implies, without saying it is, that being is mysterious. And here is the point where the two lines I have tried to trace do not meet exactly, but where they come within hailing distance. And, I believe, to expect more in a general way, of people in general, would be unreasonable.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD¹¹

The title of the lecture "Why Do We Remain Jews?"—am I correct that your answer is that we have no choice?

As honorable men, surely not.

Well, even one step back from that, even if we wish to be dishonorable, do we have a choice?

Yes. I tried to show that even then it wouldn't work because you have to have a very, very special [. . .] like a murderer, you know, who thinks that the easiest thing is to get the money he wants by murder, and then he lives his whole life with that murder. I mean, that is not a practical thing. And this fellow who tries to do that will live for the rest of his life with his solution. In other words, his solution will prove to be a problem. I made this reservation only for this reason: one cannot look into human beings, and of human beings one only knows a limited number. There may be somewhere, perhaps in Alaska, a man of Jewish origin who no one knows as a Jew and who lives happily ever after. That I cannot exclude. But you get my point.

I tend to be not quite as pessimistic temperamentally as you and perhaps younger and more foolish, but it seems to me that one of the things that could contribute to a better outlook for the problem of discrimination is just

11. The questions addressed to Strauss or comments from members of the audience are presented in italics.

the best of sciences. If we as Jews can better come to understand the Christians and non-Jews sociologically, culturally, as well as just in terms of theological doctrine, and they can come to understand us better sociologically, culturally, and historically—and so also with the Negroes—we can yet remain Jews, non-Jews, and Negroes and yet win some mutual respect.

Well, sure: I would say I deplore the word *pessimism* because that means the belief that this world is the worst of all possible worlds; and that, I think, very few people believe. It is impossible to maintain. But you think I am more apprehensive than you are?

Can we not hope at least? Let us not hope for winning an end to discrimination. I mean, everyone has his friends, everyone has his likes and his dislikes, and we don't wish to take that away from anyone although we can certainly hope for increasing the mutual respect of peoples of different religious and different races.

Sure! Sure! I mean, everyone should try to educate himself and, if he can, educate others to behave as decent human beings. But whether the so-called prejudices, meaning the erroneous opinions, are so important—in some cases they may be important—but whether they are universally so important can be doubted. You see, knowledge of another group—a nation or whatever it might be—is not necessarily conducive to good relations. The cultural exchange between Germany and France shortly before the First World War surpassed everything which the most sanguine man could expect now to take place from cultural exchange with Soviet Russia. And there was no security officer at the elbow of every German in Paris or of every Frenchman in Berlin. And yet when the thing came to the test, all these cultural relations which were much more intimate than the cultural relations between the United States' scientists and Soviet scientists meant absolutely nothing for the fate. In other words, in political matters the stronger and lower is more powerful than the higher and weaker; that is well known. But, by all means, go on! There is no question that if there are misconceptions—that if people think (to pick a somewhat neutral example) that every Negro is given to violence—of course it is good to tell him that “you are absolutely mistaken; that is a false generalization.” Surely! I'm all in favor of that. But I don't believe that [. . .] By the way, I would not regard my view as apprehensive in particular, but it is only if you expect the possibility of perfect harmony among human beings in general; then, indeed, it would be disappointing. But

what right do we have to expect that, short of divine intervention? In other words, if that day would come where there would not be a trace of "discrimination" against Jews and perfect amity between all non-Jews and all Jews in this country, I'll bet there will be another line of "discrimination" drawn. Man needs that, I believe.

In the discussion as to why we remain Jews I don't know that I heard a definition of what a Jew is. I bring this up because [I am] going back to the historical treatment [and to] whatever similarities there may be between Jews of today and our Jewish ancestors. And I wonder, reflecting on this, if with this change we can't think of something that we are progressing toward? Perhaps something which we can't define today, but still a progression? And also, looking at people in the world in general, if all people aren't progressing toward some goal?

I believe I understand your position; it has a long and very respectable ancestry also. But I would say this. That there is a change from our ancestors to us is the massive fact which is underlying my whole paper. Otherwise we would sit here and perhaps listen to a homiletic interpretation of some biblical verse, and not discuss that; or discuss some subtlety of the religious Law, and not do what we do. Surely things have changed. And you ask, "Could there not be further progress?" This means that the change from our ancestors to us was unqualifiedly a progress. A very grave assertion. If you take as the standard the absence of pogroms or other bloody things of this kind, a standard of living and many conveniences, legal security, and other greater things even, it is undeniable. Also science. I mean, there is no question that today science is much more advanced as science than it was centuries ago. But is this sufficient? Can we simply speak of progress?

Expanding on question above, I think there has also been a progress theologically speaking.

What is that?

A change. It might be individualistic, but it's a progress.

Yes, but you see, when you say "Let the individual decide," you say it is absolutely arbitrary preferences; and then we can no longer speak of progress. So why don't you stick to your guns? That would then mean that the theology written in our century—Jewish theology—is in fact superior (if you assert progress) to, say, the theology of Jehudah Halevi, Maimonides, or someone else. I mean, prior to

investigation that is surely possible, but let me only draw your attention to one thing, one point. The enormous progresses which have been achieved in every respect—in the standard of living and even politically—have very much to do with modern technology, which itself is based on modern science. This same science and technology has also made it possible for the first time, or is about to make possible, the destruction of the human race. The most wicked and vicious human beings who ever were—Nero himself—could not, even if they wished, think of such devices as the atomic bomb. In other words, his killing capacity did not reach the state of what some people call “over-kill.” That is exactly the other side. I mean, when we speak of progress, positive progress, we must also say that this progress is essentially, not accidentally, accompanied by a progress in destructiveness. And if we look at Jewish history—we look at that history as Jews—we must say that such a thing—we have gone through terrible things—but such a thing as the Nazis has never happened before. Before the twentieth century. If you look at the terrible persecution of the Middle Ages, you have to admit that this was not the *government* which demanded it. The government represented by the higher clergy was opposed to it. I mean, one can prove this by a simple picture. In some medieval churches, especially in the Muenster in Strassburg, there is a presentation of the church and the synagogue. The church: eyes open. The synagogue: blindfolded. “Blindness,” as the Christians call it. But there is nothing whatever mean and degrading in that—nothing whatever. It is a dogmatic assertion to which the Christians from their point of view are entitled; but it has nothing in itself, it has nothing whatever, to do with a debasement, degradation, and so on as a *government* policy as it was pursued in Nazi Germany. Even the tsarist regime, although it was surely abominable, did not reach that degree of abomination which the Nazis reached. And that is in the twentieth century. So I believe that [is why there are] many people who have become doubtful whether it is wise to speak of “progress.” Progress in certain respects; regress in other—perhaps more important—respects. And therefore, that we are different, that there was a change from our ancestors to us, is undeniable. And it is also prudent to assume that there will be further changes from us to Jews a hundred years from now. But that this should be a progress is an unwarranted assumption. There would be possibly, if everything goes well, a reduction in

what is now called "discrimination." That, I believe, is for the time being very possible. [. . .]

I'm afraid I didn't make my question very clear. I think you pointed out some things which aren't exactly to our taste, only the Nazis and the Russians—the possibility but not the definite direction of nuclear destruction. The point of my question was not the discussion of progress or not progress, but rather there has been an undeniable change from Judaism as it was designed many centuries ago and what it is today. And it seems to me that this change is continuing, and therefore will continue in the future; and I think it's reasonable.

Aha! That's the key point. I mean, change is undeniable. But for better or for worse, that is the question.

Well, I bring the question back to the basic discussion: why do we remain Jews? In view of this continuing change going on, we have to define—what is a Jew, and what are we remaining, what have we changed from, what are we changing to? And isn't there a possibility that the various beliefs might eventually come a little closer to something that is not what we call today "Jewish"?

Well, that was exactly the dream of the eighteenth century. Lessing put it this way in a letter to Moses Mendelssohn, if I remember well. Lessing was absolutely sick and tired of religious controversy, you know. He was not an orthodox Lutheran, and he got into all kinds of troubles. And he said, "I wish I could go to a country where there were neither Jews nor Christians." That was his simple epistolary formulation of what a very broad political movement intended. There are people who say that this notion underlies the American Constitution. You know that that is controversial, [and that it involves the meaning of the First Amendment]. It is surely at first glance a possible view: a secular society. But this is no longer an aspiration. Now we have some experiences with a secular society. And if we are sensible we must consider that experience. We have also the experience in an alternative secular society, namely, the communist society. I mean, a religious man who is sure on the basis of divine revelation that this will be the future—namely, that the Messianic Age will come—he is consistent if he believes in the face of all evidence to the contrary. But someone who bases his hopes not on divine revelation must show some human grounds for it. And I think you cannot show any. Because, you see, even granting what some people suspect—that a hundred years from

now there will no longer be religious people in practical terms; that the members of religious communities, churches, synagogues, and so on will become a tiny minority—even that would of course not mean that the distinction between Jews and Christians, between Jews and non-Jews rather, would disappear. Because a Jewish community is of this peculiar character that it is indeed what we now call a “religious community”—“religion” not being a Jewish word. But at the same time it is the people, the seed of Abraham; that goes together. How this goes together in the thought of the Jewish tradition—that is a very deep and very old question, but the fact is undeniable. You see, all practical questions must be settled here and now. The way in which your great-grandchildren might settle it cannot determine the way in which you settle it now, because you cannot possibly know under what circumstances your great-grandchildren will live. If social science claims to predict, it does not mean that it can predict the circumstances in which Jews will live a hundred years from now. The predictions of social scientists are much more circumscribed and, if I may say so, irrelevant. I mean, from a practical point of view. They are theoretically very interesting.

I have both uneasiness to express and a question to ask you. The uneasiness that I want to express firstly has to do with the fact that in the contemporary world—and I am directing my comment to the rather easy way in which you talked about the Christians on the one hand, and then the non-Jews on the other—in the contemporary world the outstanding anti-Jews or Jew haters have not been Christians, but have been Nazis on the one hand who have not been Christians and communists who have not been Christians. [Strauss: “That is correct.”] The question that I ask is: what implications do you see, if any, in the growth in the kind of friendliness—at least theologically, and in other areas too—which prevails say between people like Tillich on the one hand and Martin Buber on the other. Where, if you will, the leading theologians both Jewish and Christian have referred to each other, read each other with a considerable amount of friendliness, and quote each other. Do you see any Judaizing in the contemporary world of Christianity, or Christianizing of Judaism?

No. Surely not. I mean, I don’t know whether the examples you chose were the ones I would have chosen—I mean, the individuals you mentioned. But that is truly irrelevant. You are right. There are such figures: Parkes in England is a good example.¹² There are

12. Strauss is evidently referring to James W. Parkes (1896–1981), historian

quite a few Christians now who deplore the decision originally made by Augustine in favor of forcible persecution. I know that. And I would assume that there are at all times deep Christians who in their heart of hearts saw the same thing: that this is incompatible with Christianity. Glad as I am about these developments, I must not give up a certain (how shall I say?) sobriety to which I am obliged by virtue of the fact that I belong to a political science department. In other words, I must also speak of the seamy side of the matter. By this I do not wish for one moment to impugn the motives of any individual concerned with these matters. For example, I know Professor Finkelstein of the Theological Seminary, and he is on (as you know) excellent terms with Reinhold Niebuhr of the Union Theological Seminary; and I know other such examples. No question. But you cannot be blind to the fact that for a hundred years, gradually building up and now coming to the fore in our century, there is a very powerful movement which is both anti-Christian and anti-Jewish. And this of course leads [. . .] and here it is not entirely legitimate to adduce examples from straight politics. You know, when a new party arises—very powerful—the older parties who were in a dogfight up to this point might be compelled to make peace among themselves. That this could be, in the case of Judaism and Christianity, in the spirit of the noblest aspirations of the noblest Jews and Christians—you know, we Jews find all kinds of statements to this effect in Halevi, Maimonides, and so on. I do not wish to question the theological legitimacy [of such rapprochement], but I would like to say that we must also look at the other side. And here I come to my point. This was exactly what I tried to show. I could show it sensibly only in the case of communism—that this new power or powers which are both anti-Jewish and anti-Christian still make the distinction between Jews and Christians. The Greek Church and Islam are treated by the Soviet government very differently from the way in which (to use a Christian expression) the synagogue is treated. You see the point? Only someone completely ignorant would say that anti-Jewish things are a matter of Christianity. Of course not. The Romans and Greeks in Alexandria and other places were as much anti-

and theologian whose work focused on the history of anti-Semitism and of Jewish-Christian relations. Parkes, a Gentile, was president of the Jewish Historical Society of England at one point (1949–51), and in 1960 his book *The Foundations of Judaism and Christianity* was published in Chicago.

Jewish as the most wicked monks in Germany or in Italy or wherever it was. In other words, this fact that quite a few Christians—and I mentioned Nietzsche advisedly, from this point of view, although Nietzsche was surely not a Christian, as you all know; but Nietzsche surely was very German, and he is held partly responsible for the Nazis. And there is a certain animosity against Germany among Jews—which I shared, I believe, as much as anyone could have shared it, but which is also in need of rethinking, I believe. And we find other cases: for example, Max Weber, a man very well known in the social sciences; the philosopher Schelling, much less known; and there were some other famous cases—*precisely* in Germany—who were not only friendly to Jews but showed a very profound understanding of what one would call the “substance” of Judaism, which a man who is friendly to Jews does not as such possess, as you all know. Surely that exists. But we must not forget the background of this reconciliation. A new power has arisen: Marxist communism, which promised—by a break, a radical break, with the whole past—to destroy the very possibility of anti-Jewish feelings and thoughts. Marx’s well-known anti-Jewish utterances were, of course, not inspired by anti-Jewish feelings in the common sense of the word. Yet, Marx’s present-day successors like Khrushchev have restored anti-Jewish policies on a communist basis. However this may be, communism in principle threatens Judaism and Christianity equally. As a consequence, the Jewish-Christian antagonism—just as the intra-Christian antagonisms—tend to disappear. I would say, in proportion as Jewish-Christian antagonism disappears, other antagonisms come to sight; and these antagonisms cannot be presumed to be indifferent to the difference between Jews and non-Jews, and [are likely] to exploit it [the difference] for their purposes. But it is most important to realize, as I tried to show by the comparison of the Greek Orthodox Church and the synagogue, that the actual policies of that common enemy are much more anti-Jewish than anti-Christian. I know the facts you mention. My reference to the terrible times in the Middle Ages was intended only to dispel Heine’s crude and simplistic view: misfortune. That was not mere misfortune; that was something much greater than misfortune.

Do you agree that there is a basic difference between discrimination against Jews and discrimination against Negroes—in that those who discriminate against Negroes are glad to have some people that they can look down on or

around, whereas those who are against Jews would rather have no Jews at all, and therefore have their property belong to Christians or belong to some other sect of which they happen to be members?

I never have considered it. I don't know. I mean, in the first place I would say that the desire to have someone to look down on is not limited to anti-Jewish people. I have known Jews who have had the same desire. I mean, every man who has "ambition"—in the vulgar sense of the word—has this desire. So let us not be self-righteous at this point. But, you know, every chaser after badges doesn't have to be vicious, but the element of the viciousness is in that. But as for this point which you have made, I am not so familiar with the details of anti-Jewish and anti-Negro propaganda. The facts as you stated them—if they are facts—would simply prove there is more Jewish property to distribute easily than the Negroes have.

As a non-Jew I find that one of my greatest problems is, as you mentioned at the very end of your lecture, the fact of being and the infinity which underlies and holds up the idea of progress. And I find myself—before this idea of being—looking at a Jew as if the difference between him and me was irrelevant. The one thing that seems to distinguish us in our attitudes is that ([and] I suppose you could call me a "humanist") before the fact of being I acknowledge that all our symbols are relevant and that we all stand under the same dispensation. But the Jew will not admit that. He will never merely say, "You are a man as I." And I find this a real difficulty. [Strauss: "Oh, that is not true; I mean, that is simply not true."] No, I find that he insists, you see, in saying that he is a Jew. And this question of self-definition creates real difficulties in communication.

Oh God! That is, I think, really unfair. That is as if you would blame a Christian for saying that he is a Christian. Would you say that a Christian as Christian denies to non-Christians the qualities of men? Or a Muslim or Buddhist? Or if a man says "I am an American," does he deny that the people who are not Americans are not human beings?

No. But the Christians make certain assertions about dogma. I find that there are certain people [such as] you dealt [with] to some extent [when you raised] the problem of the Jew who cannot believe as his fathers believed. Now, I am inclined to think also that the question of race as a Nazi problem is merely a residual one. That is, there may continue—out of choice—to be people who choose to stay in the tradition and race, may continue for so

long as there is a human race, a seed, which is what we would call a "distinctive race."

Well, race not in any particular biological sense. That is, I suppose, sheer nonsense. But people who—to put it very cynically—people who believe [themselves] to be descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Yes, sure. That could be. But I would say I don't see where there is anything wrong with that.

Yes. But the whole point is that given this fact that race as such [. . .] I mean one has only to go to New York and watch, for instance, the Maccabee soccer team, which has come from Israel to play soccer on the fields of Yonkers, to realize that the whole business of race is irrelevant. All these peoples call themselves Jews, and the idea of physical race [. . .].

"Race" as it is used in any human context is not a subject about which biologists can say anything. This is clear.

Right. Granted. So this then is my point. We have the Jew who cannot identify himself with any dogmatic fixation of his fathers. And yet withal he insists on calling himself a Jew. Now, he may be a Jew, but his Jewishness consists in a myth. Which can be a reality, I grant you, in the human consciousness, but I can't lay my hands on it.

Well, that is very, very nice of you to say that it might exist, although you cannot lay your hands on it. But I would say I have tried to explain that. I took the extreme case of a Jew who feels—I did not take your particular humanist, but I could also have taken him—who thinks that this was all, well, perhaps a noble belief, but it is not a true belief. He cannot share it. And then he sees no reason whatever for perpetuation of this old community. All right. But what is he going to do? How does it look in practice? You see, in all practical matters it is not sufficient to state merely the ends; you must also show the way to the end. And the simplest thing you can show is the first step. Now, if you tell this man, "All right, you don't wear a beard"—today beards have changed their meanings, I have been told; there was a time when the beard was a sign by which you could recognize a Jew. So, in other words, all other things which he can possibly change in his external appearance he will change. He may even change his name. He may even marry a non-Jewish woman, and the children will not be brought up as either Jews or Christians; they will not be circumcised or baptised. I mean, let us go into this; if we want to commit the act of treason

we must go into it. Good, now how do we go from here? I would say you will discover—except in extremely rare cases—somewhere, flies in the ointment. For example, this very liberal Jew and this very liberal non-Jewess are not descended from rocks or oaks (to quote an old poet) but from human beings. By which I mean they belong to families. And the families do not necessarily see eye to eye with their most liberal members. The Jew may be willing to say, “All right, I will never see my father, mother, brother, and sister again.” But the non-Jewish wife—owing to an amiable weakness of the female sex—may perhaps say, “Well, it is too hard. I will see my mother.” And then they (the family) will always say, “Why did you do it? Why did you marry that Jew?” Then the children must also see the grandmother, and the same difficulty arises again. I mean, you cannot wish away these things. Then you would have to form colonies in which only people who have broken with their Jewish heritage, past origins, and with their Christian past origins would live together. People have made such small communities for other purposes—for example, for trying out socialism and communism. But they are mentioned in the histories of social movements as amiable but wholly ineffective. It doesn’t work. If you take it on the lowest ground of practice—I mean, just Machiavellian recipes for getting rid of their misfortune—it doesn’t work. It can work in individual cases. If one may speak of a living man in this connection, perhaps Bernard Baruch is an example where it worked. I have heard this at some time; but I don’t know the gentleman, and I don’t know how it works in practice. But this is a very old man now, in addition, living in the South. That I have heard; I do not know that. There may be other cases of this kind. But if it is a problem of a social kind—meaning not a problem peculiar to him, but to other people of his kind—[I] would think of the other people of his kind. And I would say that a solution which is even *perfect* for me is imperfect because of these bonds. And the fundamental point seems to me to be this. Again speaking detachedly, hard-boiledly, and disregarding all of the deeper issues, why do you want perfect solutions?

But that’s the whole point. I’m not looking for a solution. You see, I don’t want Jews to cease to exist. [Strauss: “Oh!”] That is why a man who is a religious Jew—that this is a position before the mystery of being for which I have respect. Rather more, let me say in passing, than many [others] with which I am acquainted. But I meet people who do not have this orientation.

I recognize that the race question is irrelevant; and yet withal, this individual creates a special orientation for himself which seems to me to have just the quality of a myth.

No. That is, I believe, empirically wrong. I mean, if you mean by "myth" something fabricated, merely figured out [. . .] and that was the word *galut*, "exile." In other words, the recollection, the notion, that there is something—a deep defect—in our situation as Jews, and this deep defect in our situation as Jews is connected with the deep defect with the situation of man. That was an implication of the traditional Jewish faith. This implication—disregarding the theological premises, and so on, and its consequences—is, I think, an empirically tenable assertion. And that the Jews know—most of them, I mean, it is perfectly clear: this difficult position in which modern Jews are I have not brought out fully because I thought everyone knows it. Every Jew surely knows it, and every thoughtful non-Jew who knows any Jews also doesn't have to be told. These are things which are partly very painful if no useful purpose is served—in other words, merely for the sake of the record. That is, I would not do that. But, on the other hand, one cannot deny it, and deny, as you call it, its "reality." It is not a myth. The theories of this or that Zionist ideology—these can be said to be myths. When I was still studying these things with intensity many decades ago, I always made a distinction between Pinsker as the clearest case, on the one hand, and Nordau, on the other.¹³ Pinsker really starting from the Jewish Question as it was hitting him directly; and Nordau, having a general theory of nationalism of which the Jewish case was only a special case. And I always went more for the more direct people—you know, who started from what everyone could know. And there are all kinds of things, and I don't wish to go into intra-Jewish polemics. You are aware of the fact that there are Jews, a minority in this country, who regarded the state of Israel as—to use a mild expression—as a pain in the neck. I know these people, but one can simply say that they are the delusionists. One can also say it as follows (also on the lowest denominator): that the "Jewish problem," as it is called, is the most simple and available exemplification of the human problem. That is one way of stating that the Jews are the chosen people. If that is properly developed,

13. Max Nordau (1849–1923) was a Hungarian-born writer and physician as well as Zionist who lived much of his adult life in Paris.

the whole of the other things would come out. The clean solutions of which people dream and dreamt have led either to nothing or to a much greater bestiality than the uneasy solutions with which sensible people will always be satisfied.

Well, if I were to try to draw a general principle from what you have said—I don't know if this is right—but I would say something like this: a man is being dishonorable if he chooses to disagree with, break away from, his origins, what his family believes.

I qualified that. I said that I could visualize a man stemming from absolute degradation and simply having a nobler thing in himself tending away, as it were. And I could only say he acts wisely. [And] if the singular qualities ascribed to him [were indeed present], he would not go around and peddle them and say, "Look what I achieved." But what I said is that this is not the case of the Jews. However degraded we had to live for centuries in all various countries, we were not degraded. Surely we were maltreated; all kinds of things were inflicted upon us. But for the average Jew it was perfectly clear that we did not deserve it at the hands of these people. Perhaps we deserved it at the hand of God—that is another matter—but not at the hands of the people as such. I could give you some childhood stories which—and older people or people of my age here could also give examples of what the traditional posture was. I remind you of only one essay which is still worthy to be read by everyone who is interested in this. That is an essay by Achad Ha'am. You know who he was? Asher Ginsberg. An essay by Achad Ha'am which he called "In External Freedom and Internal Slavery"—and he compared the situation of the Jews in the Russian ghetto to the chief rabbi of France, the head of the Sanhedrin, you know—an institution founded by Napoleon himself—and highly respectable, with badges and all. And then he showed him on the basis of what this man said, this chief rabbi—that he was a slave, not a free man. Externally he was free: he could vote, and do many other things—acquire property, whatever kind he liked. But in his heart he was a slave. Whereas the poorest Polish Jew—if he did not happen to be an individual with a particularly lousy character, which can happen in any community—was externally a man without rights and in this sense a slave, but not in his heart. And that is of crucial importance in this matter.

My point of view is this: if a person who is an average Jew comes to me and says, "On the basis of my latest thinking, I had a real struggle, but I have

decided that I can no longer in conscience remain a Jew. I have decided I will become a positivist; I will suspend judgment, etcetera.” I would say that, even though I realize this is going to cause trouble with his family, it’s going to be dysfunctional for him—[Strauss: “Do you mean ‘inconvenient’ ”?] yes, inconvenient for him. I would say that if this man remains a Jew he would be dishonorable.

Oh! That is another question. You mean to say: is it not morally necessary for certain Jews not to go to synagogue, not to pray, and not to participate in other communal activities?

I mean even more than that—take over, say, the trappings of another religion completely if he so decides that this is the correct thing to do.

Yes, prior to any deeper argumentation one would have to say yes. I was still brought up in the belief, in a very old fashioned country, that no Jew who ever converted to Christianity was sincere. That was what I learned and which I believed until I met, as a student, a professor and son of a rabbi who told me of his conversion to Christianity. I must say I was not impressed by his story; and if I could speak of living people here among more or less strangers, I could tell the story, which was more pitiable than an object of any indignation. But I would have to admit that he was subjectively sincere, and no calculation entered into it. I can’t say anything more about that. I know there is a real disproportion between my primitive feelings—which I learned from my wet nurse, as a much greater man put it—and my rational judgment. But as I said at the beginning, conversion was always possible. But the question was simply whether not to be a member of a Jewish congregation, with all its implications. Quite a few Jews do that; you know what the statistics say about that. Nevertheless, the interesting point is this: the Jewish Question remains. I gave you the example of those people who became Christian Scientists. I assume—because everyone must be regarded innocent until proven guilty—that they did it out of conviction. In other words, they didn’t want to get rid of a “misfortune,” but they were convinced of the truth of Christian Science. All right, but what happened to them without any doings on their side? After all, other Jews had also come to this conviction—all pure convictions. The chairman of this group came to them and said, “Why don’t you form a group of Christian Scientists of your own?” You can say, “Well, for people who are *only* concerned with the religious truth—in this case, Christian Science—it

doesn't make any difference whether they or their fellow workers are former Jews or not." Surely. That is, however, very unfair and, I would say, almost cruel, because these people suffered from that. While they did not become Christian Scientists in order to get rid of the Jewish disability, they felt a "discrimination" was committed. They are right from their point of view—only it is of no use to get indignant about individual occurrences or symptoms, and one must view the whole situation.

In a sense, and I guess with some pain, I really think that I—as a Jew who is very concerned with finding some meaningful answer as to why I remain a Jew and how to do so—must really repeat the question that was asked by the non-Jew. I think that you give us really little reason to want positively to remain Jewish. At best, you tell us that an empirical, hard-boiled analysis of the situation—which is your position tonight [Strauss: "Absolutely and always."]—would constrain one in this direction. At second best, you tell us there are various flies in the ointment which we might idealize. [Strauss: "No! I didn't say that. No, no."] Well, I guess really I'm reacting, and I think I'm permitted to react. [Strauss: "Yes, sure, get it out of your system."] But basically I think what you are really suggesting—if you talk to the young people here, of whom I number myself [Strauss: "Rightly."]—is that you are really challenging us, you're really forcing us to say that this is just another one of the things that "we shall overcome." Because, even if we fail, it is worthwhile from the way you paint the picture. And I think, and I would hope—although this is not my evening to lecture—that I have different reasons for positively wanting to remain a Jew and for having an answer to in what ways one might be meaningfully different from a Christian. But partly my difference stems from my inability to accept your basic premise. I think at least that—now, maybe we are deluded—but Americans in my situation, I think, pretty well feel that it is a revolutionary thing; that your anecdotes are out of date, so to speak; that the Christian Science story has no compelling meaning to people of our generation. And I think much of your interpretation of the American scene is based on such anecdotal material which I feel is not compelling, although it may be true that it has happened somewhere else and quite recently. But basically, accepting your premise, I would say that all you offer me positively is to be a religious Zionist. But failing that, you give me the quite comfortable solution—but which I find inadequate because not challenging enough and not different enough—to be a scientist who somehow can reconcile his scientific positivism with the eternal mystique, which, after all, derives from Judaism.

Thank you very much for your statement. You misunderstood certain points; but since I know you, I can only say that that must be due to certain defects of my presentation. When you say that my knowledge of American Jewry (and there is a question there) is defective, I simply have to grant that. I came to this country only about twenty-three years ago. (I have not figured that out at the moment, but roughly.) But I have also some training in seeing, by which I do not necessarily mean the social science training.

You see, what I tried to show is this: I think clarity or honesty about the most important matters is a most important thing. That was my premise. Therefore I rejected—partly explicitly and partly implicitly, because I couldn't develop the whole thing—all attempts to interpret the Jewish past, in terms of a culture. Therefore the emptiness of which you complain. In other words, for me the question is truly either the Torah, as understood by our tradition, or, say, unbelief. And I think that is infinitely more important than every cultural interpretation which is based on a tacit unbelief and cannot be a substitute for the belief it has given up. That is, I believe, the basis of our disagreement as far as I can see it. Let me add one point. When I say "the Jewish faith as our ancestors held it," I do not mean that every particular belief—even if entertained by the majority of Jews or by the large majority of Jews for centuries—must necessarily be binding. I happen to know a bit of the Jewish medieval thinkers, and I know that quite a few very powerful and important changes were made even by them. I believe, and I say this without any disrespect to any orthodox Jew, that it is hard for people—for most Jews today—to believe in verbal inspiration, in verbal inspiration of the Torah, and in the miracles—or most of the miracles—and other things. I know that. My friend Rabbi Harris is not here, but I am in deep sympathy with what he means by a "post-critical Judaism." I think that offers a perfectly legitimate and sensible goal, namely, to restate the essence of Jewish faith in a way which is by no means literally identical, say, with Ram Bam's "Creator of the world," or something of this kind—I mean, of any traditional statement of principles. That's not the point. But a Judaism which is not belief in the "Creator of the world"—that has problems running through it.

Now, I tell you another story, and this story has a somewhat greater dignity. One of the most outstanding Jews in Germany was Hermann Cohen, the founder of the neo-Kantian school. And he was concerned very much with how he could be both a philosopher

and a Jew, in the sense of a believing Jew. That was a lifelong struggle, and what he said is by no means irrelevant and [is] I think worthy of the study of everyone who is concerned with that question. At a certain point of his life he read to an Orthodox and educated Jew a brief statement of what he thought to be the essence of Judaism. And then the old-fashioned man, [simple] of birth and education, said, "And where remains the Creator of the world?" I have heard that in this very building at some time someone said, "I believe in God as a symbol." Then I would say that a man who says "I do not believe in God" is, other things being equal, a better man. Now I do not deny that a man can believe in God without believing in Creation, and particularly without believing in creation out of nothing. After all, the Bible itself does not explicitly teach Creation out of nothing, as one might see. But still, Judaism contains the whole notion of man's responsibility and of a final redemption. I mean, you can say "All right, abolish the personal Messiah and have only a Messianic Age"—which is done by most liberal Jews, as you know—and add many more of these things. But the very notion of the certainty of final redemption [is] untenable without belief in a God concerned with justice. And this is such a most important issue. And I would say that it seems to me that the proper posture of a man who does not believe in that is to enter into this mystery, into this mysterious belief. And [I think] he will come out of it—even if he will not come out with belief in this—with some understanding he did not have before.

One of the deepest Jewish thinkers now, in my private opinion (which doesn't count in these matters much), is Gershom Scholem of the Hebrew University. Now, in his most recent book, which is in German only¹⁴ (I suppose it came out in Hebrew, but don't even remember the German title), he shows to what amazing lengths some of our mystics went by thinking through these beliefs and their coming out with views [indicating that] many of the objections which many of us would have to such traditional beliefs [can] no longer be tenable, that is, be the kind of thing which I would regard as satisfactory. But, I believe, by simply replacing God by

14. Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) was a prolific scholar whose central interest was Jewish mysticism. Strauss was no doubt referring to one of three books by Scholem that appeared in German in the period 1960–62. These three books are all concerned with facets of Kabbala. See *Bibliography of the Writings of Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, 1977), pp. 35–38.

the creative genius of the Jewish people, one gives away, one deprives oneself—even if one does not believe—of a source of *human* understanding. Let us also not forget [to ask]—what does it mean [that] one does not believe? How much of the unbelief now existing is as much a matter of hearsay, or what someone of your profession would call “social pressure”? Belief and unbelief are not such simple states: here’s a camp of the believers; here’s a camp of nonbelievers. Politically it may very well appear this way on many occasions; but for most of the more *thoughtful* people in both camps, things would be different. Now, I do not wish to minimize folk dances, Hebrew speaking, and many other things. I do not want to minimize them. But I believe that they cannot possibly take the place of what is most profound in our tradition.

But however this may be, I have had my day in court. I have said what I thought about it, and I must say that I am surprised that you are still here.